The collapse of eastern and central European empires in the wake of the First World War laid bare the ethnic and sociocultural cleavages that imperial polities had long masked. These empires had required that existing communal loyalties and bonds be grafted onto imperial maps. All too often these overlapping identities and networks did not match. As the perennial “other” with close relations across imperial borders, Jews did not map efficiently onto empires. Jewish mobility and migration patterns fueled latent suspicions of Jewish loyalty. Some Jews embraced the establishment of new nation-states and their promise of minority rights. Others could be counted among the strongest proponents of empires, seeing them as counterweights to the more xenophobic national entities that emerged in their wake. As a result, when the existing centers collapsed during the war and power vacuums replaced autocratic states, traumatized nationalists, rogue soldiers, and hungry peasants all took out their rage on the Jewish population. The most terrible manifestations of this chaos were the pogroms of the civil war in Ukraine.

The 1,000-plus pogroms between 1918 and 1921 were unprecedented in scale, dwarfing previous bouts of anti-Jewish violence that had sporadically erupted in the region. Official Soviet investigations into the violence put the Jewish death toll at 100,194. Other observers estimated that up to 200,000 Jews were murdered. The violence of the pogroms shocked a world that was desperately striving to manufacture peace in the aftermath of the bloodbath that was the Great War. In 1919, world leaders were convening in Paris for the start of the peace talks that would culminate in a series of treaties (including the Treaty of Versailles) when word of the most deadly pogroms reached them. No-where was the impact of the pogroms felt more closely than in the United States, where recent Jewish immigrants from Ukraine followed the

Pogroms and the Collapse of Empire

Jeffrey Veidlinger
news from home with horror. The New York Times warned of the complete extermination of the Jews of Ukraine and The Nation titled its coverage of the carnage, “the Murder of a Race,” as if searching for the term “genocide” that the Polish Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin would coin some 20 years later.

After the Holocaust, serious scholarship on the pogroms of the civil war era yielded in favor of detailed studies of the next even more horrendous wave of violence. The vast scholarship on the Holocaust era, however, can shed important light on the aggression that preceded it. At the same time, a greater understanding of the carnage of the civil war can help us understand the genocidal violence that took place in the same region only 22 years later. The “Holocaust by bullets,” as the killings in the east have become known, was certainly unprecedented in its destructive force, but it also shared similarities with previous waves of murder in the region and can be seen as a continuity as well as a radical break from precedent.

Studies of the Holocaust have recently shifted away from an exclusive focus on Nazi German perpetrators to a broader understanding of the role that others—“ordinary men,” “neighbors,” and “local collaborators”—played in assisting and condoning genocide. Much of this change has come about as a result of investigations into the killings in the east, the region that historian Timothy Snyder has aptly dubbed the Bloodlands. The experience of Jews living in German- and Romanian-occupied regions of the Soviet Union—where the first mass killings took place—help us see the Holocaust not just as a bureaucratized, mechanized, and institutionalized form of mass murder orchestrated by a totalitarian state, but rather as a series of interrelated episodes of violence perpetrated by individual human beings on a local level.

At the same time, new comparative studies of ethnic violence and genocide from around the world, often drawing upon anthropological methodologies, help us better understand the pogroms of the civil war period.
We find that this era exhibited many of the same patterns of ethnic violence discernable in places like Cambodia, Rwanda, and Gujarat.

My own research, which I have been undertaking as a Frankel fellow, has three general goals. First, I seek to study the pogroms of the civil war at close range to better understand the ways that these bouts of ethnic bloodshed played out on the ground. Second, I am interested in determining the extent to which the extreme anti-Jewish brutality of the war contributed to the violence of the Holocaust. Finally, I am trying to understand the global repercussions of local ethnic savagery. This avenue of research has been made possible by the information contained in the archives of the Kiev District Commission for Relief to Victims of Pogroms from the State Archive of Kiev Oblast, microfilmed copies of which are available at U-M’s Hatcher Library. I have been able to supplement this collection with additional materials from the archives of the Joint Distribution Committee, YIVO, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Firsthand accounts by participants in relief organizations and governmental agencies—most notably the writings of historians Elias Tcherikower and Elias Heifetz—help round out the picture. At the same time, I am working with two undergraduate research assistants to map and code data from the 1926 Soviet census, which will help show the demographic impact of the pogroms, particularly as they relate to migratory patterns, and allow us to draw a more complete picture of the affected regions.

Indeed, Jewish migration patterns responded to violence on multiple levels. During the First World War, many Jews were forcibly deported away from the borderlands where they had made their homes. When they returned in 1918, they encountered more violence, most of which came about in the process of looting and plundering. Even those who lived too far from the border to be deported still found that their mobility subjected them to aggression: as merchants and travelers, Jews were highly susceptible to robbers. They were less able than non-Jews to avoid the dangers of travel altogether since their livelihoods so often depended upon it. Brigands at railway stations targeted Jews because they assumed the Jews were merchants and therefore likely to be carrying large sums of money. These railway and riverboat robberies were often the first manifestations of interethnic strife, and affected the region even before the more deadly politically motivated pogroms that erupted in 1919.

On the other hand, patterns of Jewish migration also allowed oppressed Jews in the pogrom-stricken regions to establish international self-help organizations and use their international connections to petition and lobby foreign governments for assistance. This global structure of the Jewish community allowed Jewish victims of pogroms to appeal to co-religionists across the ocean who, in turn, lobbied for congressional investigations and Red Cross assistance, thus globalizing what had begun as local interethnic squabbles.